
BURROS BALLOT

Review by
Liang Luscombe

Burros Ballot
Ry Haskings
TCB art inc., Melbourne
9-26 June 2010

TCB art inc. played host to Ry Haskings' coy spatial investigations in his most recent exhibition, *Burros Ballot*, which reflected a practice that has developed from a boisterous humour to one of oblique strategies. His interest in the frame as the platform for staging the artwork has expanded — or, in the case of *Burros Ballot*, down-sized — to explore the logic of the gallery space itself. Haskings presents us with a wall, positioned to block out the majority of the space, with the aim of creating a tight corridor. Directly painted on the centre of the wall, a striped and hard-edged abstraction wraps itself around a poster of the 1980s cult film, *The Believers*.¹

It is through the limiting of vision — the viewer is made to stand within fifty centimetres of the wall — that the 'white cube' makes itself present. In this direct engagement with the space, the walls — often an invisible support structure — become active by positing the viewer in a claustrophobic space. Any attempt to view behind the wall is met with disappointment; with only remnants of artworks from previous TCB exhibitions to be found.

Beyond the 'dagginess' and the bold — even crude — use of the colour orange, this show appears to hold a number of understated contradictions. *The Believers*, a B-grade horror film about a policeman's investigation into cult-related voodoo murders, is a story of belief stretched to its limit. The poster is abstracted through reduction and the title of the film is somewhat obscured. This formal alteration appears to address the striped wall positioned directly above. This pictorial relationship makes sly reference to the modernist belief in formalist abstraction, yet any 'hope for truthfulness to the canvas', as once championed by US art critic Clement Greenberg, is challenged in Haskings' exhibition title, *Burros Ballot* — meaning 'donkey vote'. A donkey vote amounts to a refusal to participate due to choice, lack of interest or ignorance. This linguistic equation, of abstraction to a donkey vote, would

1. *The Believers*,
dir. John
Schlesinger,
Orion Pictures
Corporation, 1987.



suggest Haskings' hesitation to consider modernist abstraction a site for critical engagement.

Through this very direct subversion of the gallery space, Haskings' scepticism towards modernism's purist excesses and even its prescription of formal interdictions are hinted at in *Burros Ballot*.² The contradiction in this exhibition lies in Haskings' own relationship to Australian modernism. Also present in the exhibition is a strong affection for the sincerity of the work of Australian abstract painters of the 1970s, such as Sydney Ball and Robert Hunter. Haskings relishes the bold use of colour and form. He does not attempt to account for modernist abstraction's tendency toward inwardness in a totalising way, but touches upon the edge of discussion surrounding the reappropriation of modernism.

This is not to deny the enjoyment and involvement evident in Haskings' working process with regard to abstraction. It seems that he accepts the specifics of his line of enquiry with an element of humour, which is evident in his previous work that used Sudoku magic number squares as the basis of abstract compositions. As Dylan Rainforth notes, Haskings 'moves what was already a critique of the critic Clement Greenberg's notion that abstraction can provide a critical commentary on experience into a mode that is purely superficial (without any negative connotations) and pleasure based'.³

Painted directly on the wall, *Burros Ballot* also reflects concerns that were examined in Haskings' recent Frankston Library wall mural.⁴ Haskings painted a loose geometric abstraction — a knowingly 'naff' piece of public art — directly on the wall of the outer-suburban library. Both works reveal the direct influence of the in situ works by artist Daniel Buren.⁵ Yet, Buren's introduction of a 'dissenting' pattern within a gallery subtly makes visible the 'white cube' and thus offers a critique of the space. The viewer's engagement with *Burros Ballot* was plagued with difficulty: the closeness of the viewer to the painted wall created a space that was both uncomfortable to be in and which made it difficult to examine the work. Within a moment or so, most people moved out of the confined space, a reversal of the typical desire to get up-close to an image. Haskings alters the usual perimeters of viewing an artwork almost to the point where it is problematic to engage.

Burros Ballot represents a testing ground for Haskings, one that is relatively provisional. This, perhaps, is where the strength of the work resides. Visually and conceptually, the exhibition could be altered at a later date, as walls can be moved and painted over. Haskings' questioning of the logic of Modernism is similarly tentative: the work is critical, but Haskings acknowledges his own implication within this logic. ■

2. Guy Lelong, Daniel Buren, Flammarion, Paris, 2002, p 113.

3. Dylan Rainforth, *Everything is Significant, or, Quank, Strangeness and Charm* (exh. cat.), Utopian Slumps, 20 June – 4 July 2009.

4. Ry Haskings, *Real Archive Loose War Paint – The Ponzi Scene*, 2010, wall-painting, Frankston City Library.

5. Guy Lelong, Daniel Buren, Flammarion, Paris, 2002, p 40.